

# Strengthening the bond between Universities in Atlantic area: Urban Project Oriented Learning

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**Abstract-** It is conventional wisdom that Project Oriented Learning (POL) and formative assessment strategies in higher education is positive. In this paper we show how the fact of giving an international dimension to this educational methodology has an exponential impact on the improvement of professional competences. Cardiff University is involved in this didactic method. This university is one of the University of de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria's partner universities located in the Atlantic area, and it takes part in some teaching program activities applied to "Planning, Land Management and Urban Projects II". This subject is part of Undergraduate Degree in Architecture (Project module), and it is taught during the second (summer) semester to 2th year Studies (4.5 ECTS).

**Keywords:** *International, Atlantic, Urban Project*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We are aware of the fact that we are increasingly immersed in a more global context. We are committed to introducing the increased use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the implementation of activities in the teaching project of the "Urban Planning, Spatial Planning and Urban Projects II" subject at University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC), which I currently coordinate, in order to argue for an increasingly internationalized university.

University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria is one of the main universities in Atlantic area, standing out in the international mobility programs and in its close involvement with new technologies. On the other hand, it has a geostrategic position in Atlantic and promoting relations between Europe, America and West Africa. ULPGC encourages internationalization to define its identity. Currently in our university there are 47 undergraduate degrees (5 of them on-line), 26 Master's degrees, in addition to 13 Ph.D. programs, 55 Experts and specialized training. Composed of 115 R&D&i groups and 11 Research Institutes. In 2010, ULPGC was awarded as "Campus of International Excellence" in Marine-maritime Area from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training of Spain.

Therefore, strengthen inter-university cooperation and coordination and promote teaching activities through the global network of partners in an international field, has become an incentive to continue intensifying the

internationalisation of Architectural Faculty of ULPGC and achieve an international training of its graduates.

## 2. CONTEXT

Making the internationalization of ULPGC one of its strengths, I decided to establish in 2015 an agreement with Cardiff University, in Wales (UK), and developed a "Staff Mobility Erasmus" for teaching and research purposes at that university for more than five months. As Cardiff University is located in the North Atlantic area, I saw it as an opportunity to make it a member of ULPGC's Partner Universities in Atlantic Space and create links with it.

Cardiff University is considered one of the "top schools of architecture in the UK", and that experience allowed me to know the teaching structure of British Educational System and contrast it with Spanish System in university studies of Architecture and Planning. At the same time, I strengthened relationships with other faculty in my area of expertise at Cardiff University.

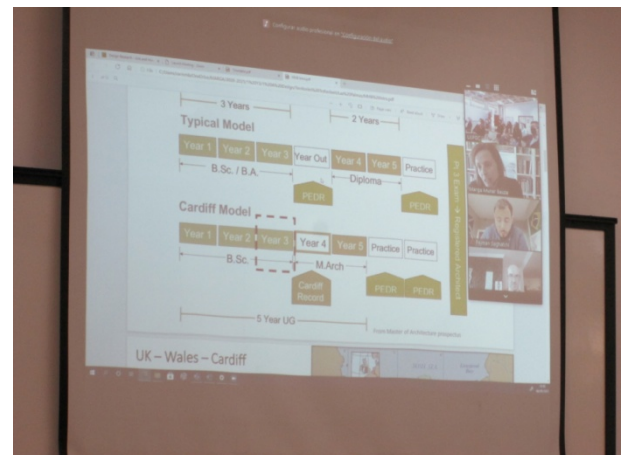


Figure 1: Slide shown at one of the meetings, showing to participants the differences between Spanish and British system in Architecture Degree

To strengthen links between universities and their implementation in Architecture Degree, I also relied on the fact that the School of Architecture of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria develops strategic alliances with other universities,

and has a Assistant Director of Internationalisation and Cooperation to advise and manage different mobility programmes, both at national level (SICUE programme) and in Europe (Erasmus+ programme) or with universities in Latin America and United States (MUNDUS programme).

### A. Application

In order to support the ULPGC's internationalisation plan, I have strengthened this relationship between ULPGC and Cardiff University by bringing it into my classroom space and applying it to some teaching activities in the "Planning, Land Management and Urban Projects II" subject, which I currently coordinate. In its teaching programme, I have incorporated joint activities for debate and reflection through Information and Communication Techniques (ICT).

Attempts are being made to apply and develop even more the use of Information and Communication Technologies in teaching, with the aim of broadening horizons as a producer of useful knowledge. It really is imperative that higher education tends to "teach to learn", not focusing exclusively on the development of memory, but on the improvement of critical intelligence, on "know-how" (fact that at present it bets essentially to prepare for the professional world), and openness towards new and interesting realities (Zabala & Arnau, 2014, p. 149)

We have noted that these new realities can reach students through debate and reflection with other partner universities and participants in the same common space, the Atlantic area. Inducing students to know other procedures of territorial analysis and project resolution in urban areas, making them sensitive and receptive to other cultures, other procedures, and making them tolerant of differences. According to Pujolas (2008), cooperative learning is the ideal framework to respond to three educational emergencies: education for dialogue, education for coexistence and education for solidarity.

### B. Objectives

Whith the implementation of this educational methodology, I intend to:

Strengthen and improve methodological processes of learning among universities and ensure adaptability to new educational technologies in the training of our students.

Intensify the internationalization of ULPGC's Architectural Studies Degree, building a globally empowered network of partners, and incorporating them in some teaching activities, in order to make the international training of our students particularly important.

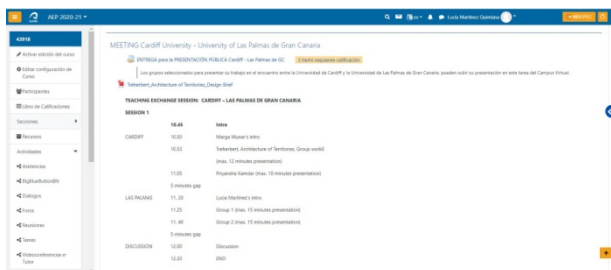


Figure 2: Publication of the teaching activity between Cardiff University and University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, on ULPGC's Virtual Campus

Establish contemporary teaching scenarios with other universities from Atlantic space, which enhance Atlanticity and allow society to perceive ULPGC as a truly internationalized University.

Promote interaction between our students and students from other universities, through specific activities developed in higher education, thus encouraging active participation and participants' language skills in interest of ULPGC's internationalisation plan.



Figure 3: Public defense in front of classmates

Commit to an intercultural knowledge transfer that allows students to know new realities, other ways of doing, and to develop in them critical intelligence. Planning, "although often formed in response to very particular problems in specific contexts, has always extended beyond borders" (Friedmann, 2010, p.313).

## 3. DESCRIPTION

"Planning, Land Management and Urban Projects II" subject is attached to ULPGC's Department of Art, City and Territory, and belongs to project module. It is taught in the 4<sup>th</sup> semester of Architectural Studies degree, with a teaching load of 4.5 ECTS ((European Credit Transfer System). This subject covered such issues as approach to conception, practice and development of small-scale urban projects. Student acquires the ability to design elementary urban plots. Student addresses the physical environment, the social environment and the theory and history of urban layout, acquiring the appropriate knowledge of the architectural, urban and landscape traditions of the Atlantic Space, and Canarian and Western culture. In short, students are introduced to the concept of "site", meaning "not only the environment where a building can be built, but also the geographical place where it is located, the geological environment that surrounds it" (Luçart, 1953, p. 495).

The respective competencies assigned to this subject are four (which correspond to some of the core competencias): CG1, CG6, CG7 and CG8) plus an additional two competencies (which are specific to Project Module): CY2 and CY12

- CG1 Analysis and synthesis capacity
- CG6 Problem solving
- CG7 Decision making
- CG8 Critical thinking

CY2 Ability to design, practice and define urban projects

CY12 Capacity to design and implement elementary urban plots

And goals for learning are four, all of them interrelated with the competencies mentioned above:

OB1.- Have the ability to distinguish compact city from open-plan city. (CG1)

OB2.- Achieve the ability to read deficiencies and distortions of an urban grid or an urban area. (CG 6; CG8)

OB3.- Acquire a level of disciplinary culture, both theoretical and project, to be able to respond to an urban problem. (CG 7; CY2)

OB4.- Address, through urban project, an answer that rebalances the bad conformation of a small fragment of the city. (CG 7; CG8; CY 12)

#### A. Methodology

A didactic methodology oriented on Project Oriented Learning (POL), will allow students to assimilate the contents, both theoretical and practical, of the classes taught. Students approach learning tasks about urban projects and cities, in order to deepen how to design an urban Project.

The methodology used in this activities affects both face-to-face and off-site teaching. With a total of 4.5 ECTS that make up the subject. 50% is face-to-face teaching, and is carried out with the direct intervention of the professor (2.25 ECTS teaching credits), and the other 50% is self-learning, carried out autonomously by the student, which is quite significant given that students will require autonomous dedication to assimilate theoretical contents and develop practical skills as well.

WITNESSING ACTIVITIES (2,25 ECTS), involve:

Lectures (0,375 ECTS). They are based on prior reading by students of a number of publications with different degrees of difficulty and subsequent joint debate in seminar dynamics. They should be understood as the construction of a small urban culture, and base their reason on the theoretical training of students, through study and reflection for a basic understanding of cities, in which it is noteworthy the relation architecture/city as a key relation for understanding of the urban fact.

Practical Classes / Analysis workshop (0,675 ECTS). They consist of reading the area in which the project intervention will be deployed later. In this process, a small fragment of the city is analyzed in order for its study to reveal the rules and general constitutive keys of the place to students. A reading that will tend to reveal the forms of the space and of the architectures, the functional contents existing in the area of study and the diverse orders that constitute and explain that place.

Practical classes / Project workshop (1,05 ECTS). It occupies the great weight of the witnessing activities. In the project classes the intervention of the urban project will be determined according to the conclusions of the analysis and the given program. The form parameters of the different free spaces and the typological options of the housing groups will be defined.

Evaluation (0,15 ECTS). In the evaluation of group work, techniques are applied to organize the work of the project, so that the participation of all members of the group is essential for the final success. (Valero-García, 2007, p. 7). This activity is where the partner universities also participate, because it is the pooling of project making and where the different realities of the Atlantic space are verified.



Figure 4: Classroom exhibition of the work produced in the Analysis Workshop

#### B. Procedure

Two meetings took place: one at the end of the Analysis Workshop and the other one at the end of the Project Workshop. The procedure was as follows:

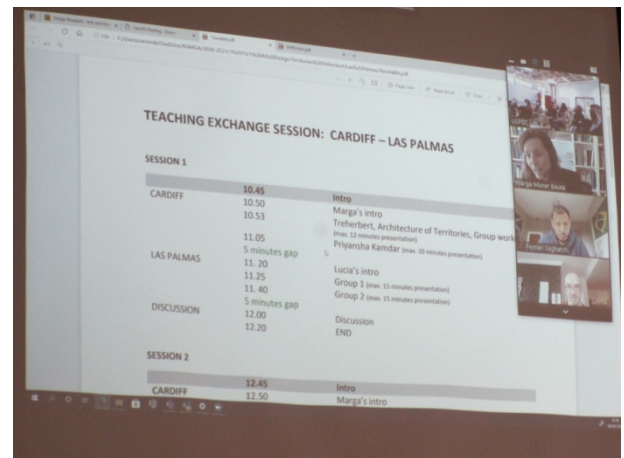


Figure 5: Organization of one of the sessions held in the exchange between ULPGC and Cardiff University

Both universals previously agree on the most specific dates for the sharing, within their teaching programs.

During the development of teaching activities each partner university preselects the most relevant and conducive projects to generate discussion. The development time of this activity is 3.75 hours and as time is limited, it is impossible for all the work carried out in the course to be exhibited.

Virtual space of collaborative work is created through ICT (this academic year 2020/21 we used Zoom), establishing an access password which is published in the virtual campus of the subject, to facilitate the access of all participants.

This activity is developed, involving both students and teachers from partner universities. This procedure consists on exposing, in English language, the pre-selected students works, both the work of Analysis phase and Urban Project phase.



Figure 6: Presentation and advocacy of a ULPGC's project using Zoom

This activity is computed in the teaching program of the subject as "examination and review", since the exposed work is evaluating, emphasizing its strengths and weaknesses.

#### 4. RESULTS

It is common knowledge that the internationalization of Universities requires a broadening of horizons and a strengthening of alliances between universities to strengthen their essential functions as a producer of knowledge, but for various reasons, not all students develop mobility activities at their training stage. Therefore, providing the great emerging development of ICT and the wide network of partner universities that the School of Architecture of the ULPGC has, my approach was to generate a feedback from my own experience "Staff Mobility Erasmus" and incorporate established international relations into classroom teaching activities.

##### A. Evaluation

In order to achieve an agile and effective evaluation, we performed it by "direct observation" and by "rubric":

Direct observation is about paying attention to how students behave during each joint activity: analyzing each action / reaction of students, and collecting and processing data on the four objectives: OB1, OB2, OB3 & OB4, detailed in the teaching guide.

This evaluation has allowed us to assess different aspects such as: attitude and participation in the classroom, as well as the application of the knowledge acquired, which demonstrates whether or not students have acquired the necessary level of disciplinary culture, both theoretical and project, to overcome this matter.

For the assessment by rubric we create a table, where the rows were the six evaluation criteria listed in the teaching guide as learning results that the student will have to achieve at the end of each task:

R1.- Student should be able to practice a reading of the place and deploy a small-scale urban project, being consistent with the place itself, and involving an operation to add complexity. (This result links with competences: CG1; CG6; CG7; CG8; CY2 and CY12)

R2.- Ability to work by groups on developing small-scale urban intervention with residential fabric, as a critical response and disciplinary content to make it solid and consistent with urban fact in which they are inserted. (It overlaps with competences: CG7 and CG8)

R3.- Ability to perform urban analysis and construct correct synthesis. (This result links with competences: CG1 and CG8)

R4.- Ability to deal with small-scale urban problems. (It intersects with the competencies: CG6; CG7; CG8 and CY2)

R5.- Development of architectural and urban reasoning skills, and show a critical attitude to reality. (This result links with competences: CG8 and CY2)

R6.- Ability to decide the contents and forms of a small-scale urban project, that is, the figures that form public free spaces and architectures, layout and urban spaces. (It links with competences: CG8; CY2 and CY12)

In each column of this heading, the quality levels achieved for each criterion were quantified numerically (from 0 to 10).

The discussion generated at the end of the joint activities was especially useful in assessing interaction, and has allowed us to testify that the level of communication between the students of both universities has been good. It has also allowed students to become aware of their own thought process and have other procedures, as well as to detect and try to overcome the difficulties encountered in the learning process.

##### B. Results

Following are the results achieved when we close contacts among universities from Atlantic area, through the "Planning, Land Management and Urban Projects II" subject:

Value our teaching activity, crossing the borders of our Atlantic space, with the use of Project Oriented Learning (POL) and more efficient formative evaluation strategies in the face of new challenges.

Offer a transfer of knowledge between universities and respond to the training demands of our students in the international arena, by giving students the opportunity to make contact with teaching realities of other foreign universities, although they do not develop mobility programmes.

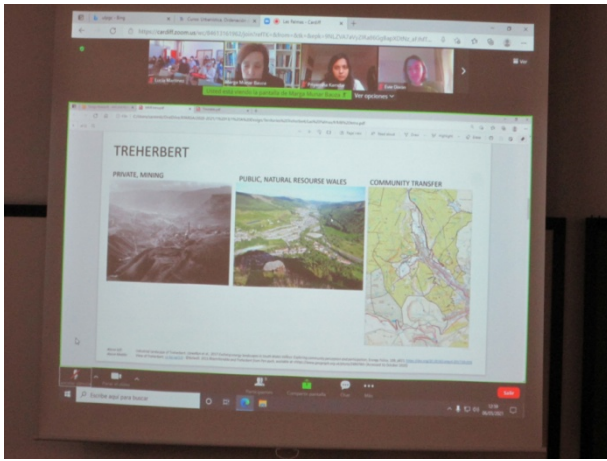


Figure 7: A group of students at Welsh School of Architecture at Cardiff University presenting their work to ULPGC student body

Bet on students, so that they can know other ways of doing, making them sensitive and receptive to other cultures, other procedures, and being tolerant of differences.

To demonstrate the significance of linguistic competence of all participants, within an increasingly emerging global market which has an impact on our society.

To ensure students an intercultural knowledge transfer, to open their minds and allow them to approach their professional future with greater maturity and complexity, by encouraging critical reasoning.

Enhance the use of ICT in the training of our students, seeking to internationalize teaching activity as a producer of useful, complex and diverse knowledge.

To encourage ULPGC's School of Architecture exchange, through its Subdirectorate of Internationalization and Cooperation, to develop new strategic alliances with other universities, in the search to promote and enhance the implementation of good practices in the field of quality and excellence in teaching.

Implement the aspects that make to ULPGC unique at university level, strengthening its Internationalization Plan and planning an innovation agenda to respond at the same speed as the new changes.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Although ULPGC is committed to promoting internationalization, in parallel it is necessary to value and reflect on pedagogical models, institutional teaching programs, and teaching structure of Architecture and Planning Studies in the context of globalization.

Incorporate educational methodologies into teaching programmes to strengthen links between partner universities, makes it possible to establish strategic alliances between teachers who share teaching objectives in the Atlantic area. And thereby, student will demonstrate to have acquired a level of disciplinary culture, understanding the place, the theoretical concepts, and the transfer of skills, by exposing and defending them adequately not only to their professors or classmates, but also to other foreign students involved in the activity.

The goal is to create positive synergies, optimizing resources and making commitments that aspire to a more plural and multicultural formation of our students, and to create scenarios for development with a shared value, which is Atlanticism.

The identification of symbols of the collective memory in these communities and their application in Urban Planning educational methodologies, strengthens an identity and common feeling of our Atlantic area, where the implementation of landscape and territory can be helpful in inter-university relations throughout our geographic area.

These actions applied to teaching activity bet on a quality, equity and internationalized education, to be solidly placed in the new landscape of globalization. This will allow our graduate students to face English language skills that are so necessary in these times of globalization and change, and to have a better capability in terms of labor supply in an increasingly changing world.

With the implementation of this Urban Project Oriented Learning methodology and giving it an international and institutional dimension, we intend to load students' learning with meanings. As Jean-Louis Déotte tells us "life are meeting, those meetings have a place, most of them are institutional" (Déotte, 2012, p. 136).

In a common environment, the Atlantic Ocean, a bridge linking Europe / West Africa / America, and having tested the benefits of these participatory teaching methodologies with Urban Project Oriented Learning, it remains for us to establish what other universities in this Atlantic area, not yet partners, may wish to join and become involved in this initiative which, jointly, is involved in participatory intercultural methodological procedures. This will allow us to consolidate ULPGC as reference of internationalization in the Atlantic.

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